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RENAN.

A DISCOURSE GIVEN AT SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL,
LONDON, OCTOBER, 9, 1892.

“Be calm and resigned,” said Renan to his weeping wife. “We undergo the laws of that nature of which we are manifestations. We perish, we disappear, but heaven and earth remain, and the march of time goes on for ever.”

It is hard to-day to respond to these last words of the dying philosopher. Heaven and earth remain, but they seem cold and grey when the great heart in which they were united has ceased to beat, and when our sweet English singer has gone silent. By the passing away of the two highest-mounted minds in Europe this society is especially bereaved. The earliest welcome given to the genius of young Tennyson came from the pen of William Johnston Fox, the first Minister of this Chapel ; here has his spiritual pilgrimage been followed, and its songs here sung as hymns. But for their magnitude Tennyson and Renan might have been considered together. They were children of the same spiritual epoch ; the son of the Catholic Church, and the English Rector's son, were fellow-pilgrims on the painful road of scepticism ; they encountered the same phantoms, were attended by the same mighty shades, and found no altar but such as their own genius could raise and their glowing hearts kindle in the wilderness of doubt and denial. Alike they distrusted democracy, and dreamed of the ideal monarch,—as of Arthur, “flower of kings,” whom ancient legends of Britain and Brittany said would some day return to lead up the Golden Year. Renan loved to tell the story of how Tennyson, roaming in Brittany, stopped at an inn

in Lannier, birthplace of Renan's mother. In the morning the poet demanded his account, but the hostess said, "There is nothing to pay, Monsieur. It is you who have sung of our King Arthur."

But the people have a greatness of their own. They enshrine Tennyson in Westminster Abbey, Renan in the Pantheon. The career of Renan is a triumph of republican France. Under the Empire he was deprived of his professorship, and of his office in the Imperial Library, for writing the "Life of Jesus." But the Republic made him President of the College of France, gave him every honor, in life as in death. The national homage to that ex-priest, that outspoken rationalist, who flattered not the masses nor fawned on power, is a high water-mark of civilisation. For it marks the rise of a steady tide of liberty, and not the mere leap of waves under some tempest of momentary emotion. The great fact is that this unique heretic, thinker, and scholar, has been able, without compromising his independence, without help of any sect or school, to live his life, think his thought, and round out his life-work with completeness, on the scene of a thousand martyrdoms.

In Renan's "Feuilles Détachées," which appeared last spring but is not yet translated, there are outbursts of gratitude to his time, which, he says, has been good to him, and pardoned many faults. He had just finished, he says, his "History of the People of Israel"—"the serious work of my life."

"The bridge which it remained to me to build between Judaism and Christianity is built. . . . In the 'Life of Jesus' I tried to exhibit the majestic growth of the Galilean tree from the stock of its roots to the summit, where sing the birds of heaven. In the volume just finished I have sought to make known the subsoil in which shot the roots of Jesus. Thus my principal duty is accomplished. At the Academy the work on the Rabbins also nears conclusion, and the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticorum* is in excellent hands. So that now, having paid all my debts, am free enough to amuse myself a little, and without scruples to indulge myself with the pleasure of gathering these leaves, often light enough."

So radiant was the author, at sixty-nine, having achieved the main schemes of a life which, at forty, was threatened with ruin by intolerance. Of course it was but a small part of what he would fain have accomplished. Last year (September 11) there was a fes-

tival in the Island of Bréhat, where Renan was the chief speaker. In the course of his address he said :

"Every year I used to come hither with my mother to visit my aunt Périne, who loved me much, for she thought me like my father. Here on your rocks, and in your paths, I formed plans and dreamed dreams, of which I have realised a third or a quarter. That is much ; I consider myself fortunate ; I hold myself among the privileged ones of life. I have been more sad than now, for I feared I might die young (misfortune notably not arrived) and never produce what was in my mind. Oh certainly, could I live a long time yet, I would know what to do. I have schemes of work for three or four lives. I would write a history of the French Revolution, showing it an attack of fever, grand, strange, horrible, and sublime ; the foundation, let us hope of something better. I would compose a history of Athens, almost day by day ; also a history of science and freethought, telling by what steps man has come to know something of how the world is made ; I would write a history of Brittany in six volumes. I would study Chinese, and review critically all the problems of Chinese history and literature. Of all that I would make nothing. There is a crowd of things I wish to know and shall never know. But why reproach nature for refusing me ? Let us recognise what she has given us. I have traversed the world at an interesting moment in its development, and, after all, have seen enough. After my time humanity will do surprising things : I can rest content during eternity."

The happiness of this venerable author, conscious that his life is closing, his work ended,—a happiness not derived from any hope of future reward, or even existence,—is a salient testimony of our time. In one of these recent addresses Renan says : "Let us die calmly, in the communion of humanity, the religion of the future." The dying Voltaire was fed with a wafer, even while he ridiculed it. Renan partakes the communion of humanity, the religion of the future. It may appear cold comfort to the superstitious, for they comprehend not that to such a man the communion of humanity implies an eternal life.

In one sense Renan lived not quite threescore years and ten ; in another he lived ages on ages. By his mastery of Eastern and Oriental languages and literatures, by his studies of ancient and modern systems, he had familiarly dwelt among primitive tribes, with them set up their sacred dolmens, knelt at their altars, travelled with their migrations in India, Persia, Egypt, Syria, shared their pilgrimages from lower to higher beliefs, listened to their prophets, visited the

home of Mary and Joseph, walked with the disciples, conversed with Jesus, witnessed the crucifixion, journeyed through the middle ages, reached the Renaissance, passed through Protestantism, gathered every spiritual flower of the nineteenth century. Such long experience of the past, such knowledge of the attractions of humanity,—predicting its fulfilments,—carry the thinker equally far into the future. Knowing the angles of convergence in time's rising pyramid, he can calculate the apex, and look down from it. He is able to rejoice in realisations of ideals now mere tendencies. His immortality is present. Such to Renan meant that communion of humanity, into which he entered by patient studies, and by the devotion of his life to the spiritual essence of the world. And this vision sustained him in his last hour.

And let me here say, that Renan's optimism was not based in any belief in a superhuman providence, or any dynamic or compulsory destiny in nature. It was his faith in the heart and brain of man. In his last work he reminds youth that their efforts at new abstractions and theologies are idle: the new notions will follow the old into extinction. "Dear children," he says—

"Dear children, it is useless to give yourself so much headache to reach only a change of error. Let us die calm, in the communion of humanity, the religion of the future. The existence of the world is assured for a long time. The future of science is guaranteed, for in the great scientific book everything adds itself and nothing is lost. Error is not deep; no error lasts long. Be tranquil. Before a thousand years, let us hope, the earth will find means to supply its exhausted coal, and, in some degree, its diminished virtue. The resources of humanity are infinite. Eternal works accomplish themselves without loss to the fountain of living forces, ever rising again to the surface. Science, above all, will continue to astonish us by its revelations, substituting the infinite of time and space for a poor creationism that can no longer satisfy the imagination of a child. Religion also is true to the infinite. When God shall be complete, he will be just. I am convinced that virtue will find itself one day clearly to have been the better part. The merit is in affirming duty against the apparent evidences. [As for the future] denying not, affirming not, let us hope. Let us keep a place at our funerals for the music and the incense."

It will be seen that Renan's deity is the brother of man's divinity. God is as dependent on man as man on God. Natural evil is God's incompleteness: when man is complete God will be complete: there will be no more injustice.

But I must warn you that while this is the way in which Renan impresses me, he is not a man to be caught or held in any one theory. He is the many-sided man of our time. When I heard his lectures in his college, two years ago,—his French was so clear and expressive that even a limping listener could follow him tolerably,—he impressed me as a sort of Buddha. Buddha is supposed by some to have got his large form by sitting so long in contemplation, by others his size is regarded as a protest against the meagreness of ill-fed ascetics. The unfurrowed serenity of Buddha's face, his infantine smile, were those of Renan, also the remembered music of his voice. This association has been extended to Renan's spiritual nature by a letter of his to a friend, in his "*Feuilles Détachées*." He is fascinated by the legends of Buddha and Krishna which describe them as multiplying themselves. When Buddha was born into this world, ten thousand women entreated to be his nurses, and Buddha multiplied himself into ten thousand babies. Each woman believed that she alone had nursed the true Buddha. In the legend of the god Krishna, he first appeared to some shepherdesses who were dancing. The beautiful god multiplied himself into as many forms as there were maidens, so that each believed that she alone had danced with Krishna, and through life kept her heart sacred to him. Writing of these legends, Renan says:

"The ideal loses nothing by dividing itself: it is entire in each of its parts. We live that part of Krishna which we assimilate according to our genius. The ideal is for all partakers, like morsels modified to each taste. Each creates his divine dancer. One refinement I would introduce into the legend of Krishna, should I ever make it into a drama, or, better, a philosophic ballet: at the time when the shepherdesses believed they were singly dancing with Krishna, he should find that they were in reality dancing with different Krishnas. Each had made her Krishna to her fancy, and when they came to describe to each other their heavenly lover, they should find their visions in nowise alike; and nevertheless to each it was always Krishna."

The legend which thus charmed Renan has many correspondences in religious history; in Christianity, for instance, where we to-day find a hundred and fifty sects, each believing that it alone has the true Christ for partner. But it applies to all great personalities, and to all spiritual influences. The finest spirits frame no

systems, found no schools. They are akin to the sun and rain which nourish and paint innumerable and diverse growths. It was so with Emerson. Dean Stanley said that he heard many different preachers in America, but their sermons were generally by Emerson. It was preëminently the case with Renan. The Catholic, the Protestant, the idealist, the sceptic, the man of the world, the mystic, the conservative, the radical, provided they are unsophisticated like the shepherdesses, not champions of some sect or party, find that Renan has spoken better for them than they can for themselves ; he knows their secret heart, is their partner by unbounded sympathies. Yet it is always the same Renan, full and entire in each and all of his manifestations.

Some time ago, when his friend Littré, the Positivist, was buried by his family with Catholic rites, the aspersoir passed round the grave, and came to Renan, who, like the rest, sprinkled holy water on the coffin. There were cries of "Shame" among the freethinkers present ; but really it was the act of a man less sectarian than themselves. The same tenderness that could not wound the family parting for ever from their beloved, is visible in the gentleness with which he treats old beliefs, when it is a question of affection or sentiment, not of dogma and authority. They have died out of his mind utterly ; he sees the creeds already in their graves ; he no longer fears them, but is glad to soothe those who cling to their lifeless forms by speaking kindly of their virtues in the past. His "Life of Jesus" is, in large part, a wreath of immortelles laid on the tomb of a faith to him utterly dead,—that is, faith in a supernatural Christ. He once told me of a little island on the coast of his native Brittany, from which some medieval saint was supposed to have driven monstrous serpents, or worms. To that island the peasants still repair to get a little of the soil to use as a—vermifuge. To similarly small size had shrunk, in Renan's view, the greatest dogmas and superstitions of Christendom. Others might still compliment them with fear and wrath, but Renan was tender to them because of their smallness. He was endlessly good-natured with his ignorant opponents, from whom he often received warning letters. Of one who wrote him simply the words, *Remember, there is a Hell*, he said that this

monitor did not terrify him as much as he may have supposed. He (Renan) would be rather glad to know for certain that there was beyond the grave even a hell. And if he should go there he felt certain that he would be able to address to the deity such subtle arguments to prove that he ought not to remain there, but to be transferred to paradise, (only he feared his exhorter's paradise would be very dull,) that he would presently be released.

One purpose of the "Life of Jesus" has been mentioned, but that work had also another and a higher aim. With a love like that of Mary Magdalene, in whose rapt vision Jesus rose from the tomb, to be transformed into a supernatural Christ, Renan sought to raise out of the grave of that supernatural Christ the human Jesus. He had travelled through Palestine, visited every spot associated with the great teacher, and drew the most realistic portraiture he could of the parents, home, friends, disciples, and daily life of Jesus. The outcry against that book was a confession by theology of its utter loss of the human personality of Jesus. There had been a time when the religious heart loved to dwell on the sweet humanities of Jesus. In the seventeenth century the poet, Thomas Dekker, wrote :

" The best of men
That e'er wore earth about him was a sufferer ;
A soft, meek, patient, humble, tranquil spirit,
The first true gentleman that ever breathed."

And such remembrance of Jesus, in his life among the people, his friendships, smiles and tears, are found in the sermons of Tillotson, South, Jeremy Taylor. But the descended God gradually consumed the humanity. In the last century it became a heresy to consider Jesus as a man. The man was crucified on a cross of dogmas ; he lay dead and buried under a stony theology, until Renan rolled away the stone, raised him to life, clothed him with flesh and blood, invested him with beauty, and said once more to the Pharisee, the sceptic, the scoffer—*Behold the man!* For writing that book,—just after Strauss had shown the Christ of Christendom a mythological figure,—the churches should have clasped Renan's knees. But for it they heaped him with abuse, declared that Jewish bankers had bribed him to write it, drove him from his professorship of Hebrew,

reduced him to poverty. The Pope denounced him as "The European Blasphemer." He has been terribly avenged in his own country, where every educated man has abandoned the church. And he lived to see the Christianity of England striving to gain a new hold on the people by following his brave gesture,—rationalising away the supernatural Christ, and exalting the humanity of Jesus as the sign of his divinity. The criticism of that work is not at all so destructive as that of many who have written in the generation that has elapsed since its appearance,—of Dr. Martineau, for instance, on whom Oxford has conferred a doctor's degree. Indeed, in reading Renan's "Life of Jesus" now, one is surprised by its concessions. He accepts the four Gospels as coming from the first century, a belief which even the learned theologians have abandoned. Some newspaper has said that Renan borrowed from Strauss; on the contrary, the fault of the book is that it did not borrow from Strauss, and from English authors, who had proved that the Gospels are all of the second century. That would have relieved him of the necessity of apologising for Jesus in some matters of which Jesus never heard, of which Paul in the first century knew nothing, as when he intimates that Jesus may have once lent himself to an amiable deception. No miracle was ever ascribed to Jesus by any writer of his own century. In several other respects Renan's "Life of Jesus," on its negative side, is behind the advance of research and criticism. But those are small details compared with the spirit and general purpose of the work. In this moment, when we are celebrating the discovery of a western world, we may well pay homage to the scholar who rediscovered and exhumed an eastern world, long buried under débris of mythology and rubbish of superstitions. This Renan has done in his series of works on the "Origins of Christianity," beginning with the "Life of Jesus," dealing with the "Apostles," with "St. Paul," with "Antichrist," and other studies, leading up to his "History of the People of Israel."

In all these works there is not a line that is not interesting, alike to learned and unlearned. As some one has said, Renan could make Hebrew roots blossom with roses and lilies. But that super-fine art of his was carrying the cause of intellectual and religious

emancipation. For these works concerned the constitution of Europe. This Great Britain, with all its physical freedom, is religiously a mere dependency of Judea. Here men were formerly burnt, until lately imprisoned, and even now denied equal advantages, not in accordance with what Englishmen think, but with the opinions of some ancient Jews. The voice of the Jews was the voice of God. But Judea, like the Grand Llama, could rule only while veiled. Renan unveiled it. He did it all the more effectually because in the literary and philosophic spirit. All the ages of Judea, from the first tribal groups to the movement of John the Baptist and Jesus, are assigned their exact place as successive chapters of human history, the natural origin of their mythology is explained, Jehovah takes his seat beside Jupiter and Brahma, Jesus is revered with Buddha and Zoroaster; and all this is done, not by mere opinion, but by impregnable facts, unwearied researches, inflexible veracity. It was also done lovingly. A superstition can survive combat, but not explanation. Renan did much to remove Christianity from the field of militant camps to the quiet province of literary investigation. In the Republic of Letters there is no arbitrary authority. The combat is left to salvation armies,—“theirs not to reason why.”

There is a large Renan literature. More than three hundred works represent the efforts of theology to get the resuscitated human Jesus back into his grave again. Renan's accessible life-work is represented by about twenty-five volumes, of which some are philosophic diversions written amid the heavy labours of his College, and while collecting and preserving for scholars the whole body of Semitic inscriptions. For more than twenty years Renan has been training the young scholars of France—those who are to fashion France in the future, and influence mankind. Those acquainted with his larger works can realise his immense service in elevating the standard of criticism, and establishing the method of exact research and exact thought. But there are other works of Renan, notably his *Philosophic Dramas*, not yet translated, from which may be better gathered the great variety of his ability, the poetic play of his genius, and the charm of his personality, which some of us have personally felt, and which so won all hearts that even the priesthood

have not raised discordant notes in the homage and emotion with which his nation has laid him in an honoured grave.

Farewell, great heart, and great leader ! On your coffin I laid a wreath of immortelles for friendship, for the homage of America, and for the sake of this free English Society. For your victory is ours also : your triumph is that of every independent mind on earth.

MONCURE D. CONWAY.